

# PUBLIC HEALTH REPORT

**Lester Breslow, M.D., M.P.H.**

**Director, State Department of Public Health**

DIVORCE AND ITS by-products are an ever-growing problem in California. While some information, such as the annual totals of divorces and annulments had been available for decades, it was not comprehensive enough for legislative or other serious study.

This situation was corrected by the State Legislature when it required that divorce actions be made reportable in more detail beginning 1 January 1966, and added to the vital statistics of births, marriages and deaths.

As early as December 1948 the State Bureau of Vital Statistics, assisted by the county clerks' offices, began compiling the numbers of final divorces and annulments granted by year by county. The yearly compilations provided a Statewide divorce and annulment total, but little more. Legislation at Sacramento established the first statewide registration effective 1 January 1962, and although the resulting centralized registration was an improvement, the meagerness of the data collected still remained a major shortcoming.

The information gathered was less than that required by the Divorce Registration Area of the National Division of Vital Statistics, and California remained excluded from this national data collecting system. The 1966 legislation brings California's reporting into conformity and in 1968 the state will be eligible for admission to the National Divorce Registration Area.

Today the divorce reporting program, administered by the State Bureau of Vital Statistics, is the most comprehensive in the nation in scope of data collected. The growing body of information has significance for physicians, social scientists and attorneys—among other groups—concerned with population growth and the integrity or disintegration of families.

The following data, taken from the first year of comprehensive reporting, may have indirect medical implications.

- Compared with 144,086 marriages during 1966, more than 105,000 initial complaints were filed that same year for divorce, annulment and separate maintenance. How many of them were final is yet to be reported. Of these, nine out of ten cases which began the dissolution process were divorce actions.

- A total of 150,000 children of all ages — 130,000 of them under the age of 18, including 60,000 infants and pre-school children under six years — were members of families in the divorcing population.

- Among divorcing couples with children there was apparently premarital conception in about 25 per cent of the families. Where the wife was under 20 when married, about one-third of those with children apparently had premarital conception.

- Divorcing husbands and wives were younger than married persons in the general population: in median ages the husbands were 34.2 years old and the wives 31 years, when the initial complaint was filed. One-fourth of the couples were married 13 years or longer; for two-thirds of the divorcing persons this had been the only marriage.

The State Bureau of Vital Statistics plans to initiate and encourage special studies based on data from the reporting program. The variety and quantity of data on divorce that is now being collected should enable qualified investigators to expand knowledge in the field of family dynamics.

The statute establishing the current reporting program runs until 31 December 1969. This will provide an opportunity, in the latter part of 1968, for a thorough review of the utilization of the data made available through this reporting program. By then the accumulated data and findings should provide the legislature with sufficient basis to determine whether the reporting program is to be terminated, or modified and continued.